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LEAFLET

MARTHA HALE SHACKFORD

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THE STUDY OF VERSIFICATION

Ought the secondary schools to devote time to the study of verse forms, or is that subject beyond their scope? The oracles are dumb, indeed, regarding this matter and, in consequence, the most discordant practices prevail. Those who prepare the lists of required reading say nothing about the necessity of training students in the elementary principles of versification. The schools which develop this subject do so from inherent virtue rather than from any sense of compulsion; the schools which ignore the subject are entirely within their rights when they maintain that they are not constrained by authority to pay attention to rhyme and metre and such matters. College teachers of literature are confronted with difficult problems because of this lack of uniformity in the work in preparatory English. Every year I find in my classes students who say that they have never been taught to scan English poetry. All that they know about scansion they learned in studying Virgil. Given the task of distinguishing between trochee and iambus, or between tetrameter and pentameter, they betray pitiable confusion. When discussing Middle English metrical romances and trying to suggest something of the history of the octosyllabic couplet in English literature, ought not a teacher to expect that students who have studied *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* will recognize the term and will not need to have the subject explained from the beginning? For several years I have been asking my classes early in the year to tell me what is the verse form of these two poems. Usually at least one third of the class is utterly bewildered by the question; some hopefully suggest that *L'Allegro* is in heroic couplet, others suggest blank verse. It is not always because pupils have not received instruction in this subject that they are thus ignorant, but because there is not enough emphasis placed upon the importance of versification. Perhaps there are some colleges where the matter is

regarded as insignificant, but I believe that the majority of our higher institutions expect that every boy and every girl who enters college will know something about the distinctions between verse and prose. Let us place the blame, where it properly belongs, upon the colleges, not upon the secondary schools where every effort is made to discover the somewhat inscrutable designs of those who frame the entrance requirements in English. College is not the place for giving elementary instruction, and we must always remember that many students never study literature in college. This preparation must be given in the secondary school.

Does any serious student of educational matters deny the fact that it is of great importance for the youth of America to be trained early to a sense of beauty? Is not one effective way of quickening the aesthetic consciousness to be found in the study of poetry as a representative art? Is not the study of metre and of poetic rhythm one of the simplest and most evident means of developing the taste and the judgment of our young folk? We all want our pupils to love poetry for its imaginative idealism, and also for its music. We hope, as they continue their study of our masterpieces, that these high school pupils will become increasingly sensitive not only to the beauties of diction and imagery which characterize the style, but also to the musical harmonies and gradations which characterize the metrical structure of real poetry. It is not an artificial, sentimental prejudice in favor of poetry that our schools should seek to create, but a sincere and practical knowledge of some of the truths which help a reader to finer appreciations of a great art. If it is desirable for pupils to outline the subject matter of *The Ancient Mariner*, it is also desirable for them to note with what skill Coleridge has given this tale of the supernatural a metrical expression which by its simplicity, its quaintness, its appealing melodies of line, enhances the mysterious beauties of the poem. It is not fair to our students to pass lightly over these questions as if metre were merely accidental and mechanical. The preoccupation of the poets with metre and rhyme, their constant, passionate endeavor to render their ideas in appropriate external form makes it imperative for us to follow with some degree of thoughtfulness the ways in which they have given musical dress to their themes. To ignore the significant beauty of verse form is to falsify the traditions of literary appreciation. We rob our pu-

pils of at least one third of their enjoyment of poetry if we do not emphasize, by iteration and reiteration, the fact that verse form is an inherent, organic part of a poem. The true lover of poetry is he who is as instantly sensitive to the musical effect of a poem, as he is to its inner significance.

This training can be given without expenditure of time and strength, if the teacher always makes a point of discussing the versification of every poem taken up in class. Pupils should be made to read each poem aloud, and thus gain general impressions regarding the form. Then they should scan certain parts, until they overcome any difficulties in working off the syllables. They should examine the rhyme scheme, and at last build up their definition of this special form. The teachers may give them the technical terms that are essential, always calling their attention to important names. The radical defect in the training of pupils is a lack of sufficient practice in reading and scanning aloud. It may seem ignominious to a young person to go through such training, but the only way in which the average pupil can be made to recognize the laws of poetic rhythm is to scan and scan and scan until he actually feels the symmetry of each verse. We all know how pupils waver and hesitate when they read poetry aloud, and this is largely because they do not fully realize the truth that word stress and metrical stress are the same in good poetry. Just as soon as pupils feel confident that they know where to place the accent they become appreciative of metrical structure, and unexpectedly critical of irregular and awkward lines. Furthermore, it appears that not enough suggestion is given to students about noting the especially musical words in the poem they read. Attention may easily be directed to this matter by asking pupils to point out the words they consider most melodious and the ones they consider harsh. A little suggestion will go a long way toward prompting readers to think about these things for themselves. Some discussion may be made regarding the question of the length of lines in poetry by asking,—to illustrate the comparative values of tetrameter and pentameter,—what are the reasons why *L'Allegro* would lose its vivacity of movement if it were written in pentameter, and why Gray's *Elegy* would lose some of its stately impressiveness if it were in tetrameter. Comparison of metres will help to quicken observation and appreciation.

Whatever the teacher chooses to do in the way of practice, he has, however, some very definite duties. Certainly every pupil should have unforgettable knowledge of the exact meaning of these terms: iambus, trochee, dactyl, anapest; dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter; caesura; slurring; end-stopt line, run-on line; alliteration, end-rhyme; verse, stanza; blank verse, octosyllabic couplet, heroic couplet, ballad stanza, and sonnet; epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry should be discussed from the point of view of metre, as well as from that of theme, and pupils should be taught what verse forms are especially characteristic of epic and drama, and what endless variety may be found in lyric measures.

It may be suggested, as a minor matter, that it is very advantageous, in these days when the printed book has superseded the chants of the minstrel, for pupils to be trained to get visual images of the poem upon the page. Mechanical it is, indeed, but it helps students to remember such simple matters as, whether a poem has the symmetrical divisions of the ballad stanza, or whether it has the continuous lines of epic blank verse.

Something may be said about the choice of poems in Group V. If our pupils are to receive drill in versification, and if they are to be taught that poetry is one of the arts, parallel with painting, sculpture, and music, they must make some study of the typical verse structure of each poetic form,—epic, drama, and lyric. The study of the drama is actually necessitated by the entrance requirements; but there is no distinct statement demanding that epic and lyric poetry be studied. Apologists may say that in the study of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* sufficient training is given in the lyric, but is it not true that fully one half of each of these poems is narrative rather than lyric? It is to be hoped that they will never be dropped from the list of requirements, for they afford invaluable training, but they are not all-sufficient; something more is needed to develop in youthful readers the taste for pure lyric.

It is possible at present for a teacher to ignore one or the other division entirely, for he may choose in Group V. two units in epic poetry, or two units in lyric poetry. Pupils may be studying *The Courtship of Miles Standish* and *Snow Bound* and *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, together with *Sohrab and Rustum*; or only the two units in the *Golden Treasury*. Such cases may be rare, but since there are no restrictions we are not safeguarding the true interests of

our pupils. Worse almost than the danger of lack of balance is the danger that some teachers will really single out for special study *The Raven*, whose presence in this group is sinister enough. By prolonged study of this school-boy exercise in onomatopoeia and internal rhymes, what may not be accomplished for the destruction of true standards of poetic beauty? Why can we not have, as a substitute, such an onomatopoetic lyric as Arnold's *The Forsaken Mer-man*, or, if we must be patriotic, Reed's *Naples Bay*?

The principle of emphasizing the music of poetry, and, in particular, the music of lyric poetry, seems a very essential one in the teaching of literature. It can surely do no harm, while it unquestionably does some good. Plato named music in all its forms as a necessary element in the development of the perfect state. We have, also, Shakespeare's word for it that the man who

"is not moved with concord of sweet sounds
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils."

Let us strive to give our pupils more orderly instruction in this subject, and force them to bring their intelligence to bear upon it. Only by constant practice in close analysis of verse forms, and by asking the question—"Why did the poet choose this verse form?"—will young people become more appreciative of that essential harmony which underlies all poetry where inner vision is revealed in outer, concrete beauty.

"Moving to melody
Floated the Gleam."

MARTHA HALE SHACKFORD.

Wellesley College.

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